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Should I Stay Or Should I Go? Mood Congruity, Self-Monitoring and Retail Context Preference

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This article extends the discussion of congruity 1) by examining the effect in a retail context and, 2) by considering the moderating role of self-monitoring on congruity. Two experiments found that when low self-monitors imagine a context that differs in valence from their mood, they feel more distinctive from the environment and, in turn, prefer contexts that are congruent with their mood. High self-monitors on the other hand prefer a context that differs in valence from their mood. The implications of these results for retail atmospherics are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The vast majority of retailers appear to focus on optimizing customers' positive mood. The stores will feature cheery lighting, upbeat music, and reward sales staff for conveying positive feelings (Grimsley 1998). This makes intuitive sense. Retailers know that a customer's buying behavior is influenced by the atmosphere of the store (Swinyard 1993). The more positive the atmosphere the more positive the customer's perception of the store would seem to be (Schwarz and Clore 1983). Yet imagine the following scenario. After shoveling out your car on a particularly snowy day you finally make it to the store. As you enter, feet soaked and struggling to close your umbrella, you encounter bright lights, upbeat music, and beaming salespeople. You find the contrast between the cheery store environment and your dour mood makes you feel distinctive and different from the retail setting and people in it. Our study evaluated the counterintuitive prediction that under some circumstances customers in a bad mood will react negatively to a positive, upbeat retail environment. Further, it examined how self-monitoring may moderate this effect.

The primary hypotheses were as follows:

H1: Self-monitoring will significantly moderate the effect of a mood-congruent versus a mood-incongruent context on felt mood-distinctiveness such that low self-monitors will feel more distinctive in a mood-incongruent context than high self-monitors.

H2: Self-monitoring will significantly moderate the effect of a mood-congruent versus a mood-incongruent context on retail context preference such that high self-monitors will prefer a mood incongruent context more than low self-monitors.

Experiment 1

Method

The experiment was a 2 (retail context: mood-incongruent or mood-congruent) x 2 (self-monitoring: low or high) between-subjects factorial design.

Independent Variables

Mood Manipulation. A film mood manipulation was used to induce a good or bad mood. Participants who watched *Big* felt significantly more Positive Mood than participants who watched *Steel Magnolias* (*M*s=7.36 vs. 3.33; t (14)=7.88, p<.001).

Mood-Congruence Manipulation. Participants imagined that they needed to buy a book and saw an ad for a "Standard Barnes and Noble" or a "Celebrating Barnes and Noble" store. For bad mood participants the Celebrating Barnes and Noble store was a mood-incongruent context and the Standard Barnes and Noble store a mood-congruent one (vice versa for good mood participants).

Self-Monitoring. To measure participants' tendency to modify their behavior in response to a social context, participants completed a standardized measure of self-monitoring (Snyder 1974).

Dependent Variables

Reaction to Retail Outlet. To examine the effects of a mood-incongruent context on Felt Mood-distinctiveness, distinctive, unique, different current mood and different mood were combined to form a Felt Mood-distinctiveness composite (α=.65).

Procedure. After watching the mood induction clip participants saw one of the two ads and completed the ratings.

Results

Reactions to Retail Outlet. Consistent with hypotheses, participants who imagined a mood-incongruent context reported feeling more Felt Mood-distinctiveness (M=5.50, SD=1.33) than participants who imagined a mood-congruent context (M=4.32, SD=1.33; F (1, 31)=9.59, p<.01). Consistent with expectations, the interaction of self-monitoring and Mood-distinctiveness was significant (F(1,31)=6.61, p <.05). Low self-monitors showed a stronger effect of Mood-distinctiveness on Felt Mood-distinctiveness compared to high self-monitors. Thus it seems that low self-monitors feel a great deal more distinctive when imagining an incongruent context.

Experiment 2

The second experiment examined consumer behavior in a preference context. If customers who feel good or bad perceive that a somber or happy retail context, respectively, will make them feel distinctive and different from the context, they may be inclined to avoid that context.

Method

The experiment was a 2 (retail context: mood-incongruent vs. mood-congruent) within x 2 (self-monitoring: low or high) between-subjects factorial design.

Procedure and Materials. The procedure and materials for Experiment 2 were virtually identical to those used in Experiment 1 and rated their preference for each retail context.

Dependent Variable

Store Preference. To measure participant reactions to the retail outlets, participants indicated how much they would like to visit the store.

Results

Store Preference. Consistent with Hypothesis 2 low self-monitors were less likely to prefer a mood-incongruent context than a mood-congruent context (F (1, 37)=7.89, p<.01). In contrast, high self-monitors were more likely to prefer a mood-incongruent context than a mood-congruent one.

Conclusions

Experiment 1 found that whereas low self-monitors report feeling more distinctive in a mood-incongruent context, high self-monitors do not. So, while a happy low self-monitor feels they would fit right in at a happy retail environment, a sad low self-monitor anticipates that a happy retail environment would make them feel distinctive so they avoid this retail environment. Experiment 2 provided further evidence that low self-monitors react negatively to a mood-incongruent context and are inclined to avoid such a context.

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